

# Literacy, Gender and Vulnerability

## *Donor Discourses and Local Realities*

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### **1 Introduction**

The designation of 1990 as International Literacy Year sparked a renewed interest in adult literacy within the development community. Claims for the power of literacy frequently verged on the hyperbolic. In particular, the development discourse contained many references to the transformatory potential of literacy for women. In this article I intend to deconstruct the donor discourses on gender, literacy and 'vulnerability' within the pilot phase of a national mass literacy programme in Ghana. In so doing I will attempt to demonstrate firstly how this discourse tends to construct the representation of 'the composite illiterate woman'. This, I will argue, has the effect of undermining the considerable knowledge and skills of un-schooled women and creates a false dichotomy between vulnerable non-literate women and more 'empowered' literate women. Moreover, such representations have the effect of disguising the heterogeneity of non-literate women, including diverse class locations and the varied extent to which the lack of such skills impacted on their lives. Failure to take into account such heterogeneity, especially the varied class positions of non-literate women, is also detrimental to the implementation of literacy programmes, especially those which are poverty focused, if they do not make special attempts to attract very poor women who will face the greatest barriers in attending literacy classes.

Secondly in this article I will show how the Ministry and donor expectations as to how literacy would reduce vulnerability contrasted markedly with the expectations of the women themselves. Whereas the dominant discourse referred to the potential of literacy in revolutionising peoples' lives, for those attending literacy classes specific literacies were desired which could help them make incremental shifts in their access to social status or economic power. By taking an ethnographic and 'ideological' (Street 1984) approach to literacy which examines how literacies are interwoven with relationships of power, including gendered power relations, I would argue that it is possible to excavate the meanings of literacy from the perspective of various stakeholders and understand more precisely the ways in which different literacy skills contribute to controlling and accessing social status and economic resources, thus helping to reduce their vulnerability.

## 2 Background

The Ghanaian Functional Literacy Programme (FLP) was originally conceived of as part of a special Programme of Action to Mitigate the Social Costs of Adjustment (PAMSCAD). This programme emerged in 1987 as a response to the adverse effects of the World Bank/IMF Economic Recovery Programme and was launched under the newly created Non-Formal Education Division. The NFED's role was originally conceived as an umbrella body to co-ordinate the existing government and non-governmental agencies involved in literacy activities, in particular the churches, Institutes of Adult Education, Departments of Community Development and the 31st December Women's Movement.

The FLP, along with other components of the PAMSCAD programme, was presented to international donors at a conference convened by the World Bank in 1987. It was at this conference that the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) expressed an interest in supporting this initiative as part of its commitment to poverty reduction and to programmes which would have significant benefits for women, and agreed to support the programme initially for a three year pilot period starting in 1989.

The aims of this pilot phase were to set in place the machinery for a mass literacy campaign and to test approaches in two pilot areas, Apam/Winneba districts in the South and Tono/Vea districts in the North. Financial and technical support was earmarked for the development of distance education through local FM radio stations, developing and testing literacy materials and providing management strengthening for the newly established Non-Formal Education Division (NFED). The project memorandum also stressed the importance of paying particular attention to the needs of women in the design and implementation of the programme.

## 3 Literacy, Gender and Poverty: the Donor Discourses

It would be a gross over-simplification to portray the donor, governmental and non-governmental agencies involved in the planning, funding and implementation of the pilot phase of the FLP as

ideological monoliths. During my year's field-work in the southern pilot area it was possible to discern divergent priorities and ideological approaches both between and within the different agencies. There were clearly different literacy agendas amongst the various stakeholders (literacy for promoting women in development, literacy for political empowerment, literacy for sustained economic growth, and so on). To complicate matters still further, the literacy discourse was constantly shifting and definitions of 'functional literacy' continued to evolve during the pilot phase. Despite this apparently tangled web of discursive representations of literacy, it was possible to discern trends that illuminate the underlying dominant assumptions about the value of literacy and in particular its impact on poverty and gender-relations.

In the project documentation and policy statements articulated in the pilot phase, various assertions were made about the transformative potential of literacy. Underlying these were two dominant paradigms of literacy which paradoxically reflected opposing ideological and political perspectives. Firstly, there was the technocratic paradigm closely associated with human capital theories of education, which portrays education as prerequisite for raising economic productivity and increased efficiency. This was very much a part of the World Bank thinking and reflected in the World Bank's **Literacy and Functional Skills Project Report** (1992) which claimed:

Without a literate population, it is unlikely that Government's accelerate growth strategy of 5 per cent per annum will be possible. In addition without a literate peasantry it is unlikely that significant increases in agricultural yields, particularly of food crops, will be possible.

Although women were not specifically mentioned here as being part of this more productive peasantry, in the earlier documentation they **were** given specific mention regarding their reproductive roles. Literacy would have a positive impact on women, it was argued, through the reduction in fertility rate. Such sentiments were also reflected in the Bank's Policy study on education in sub-Saharan Africa where it states that

Increased investment in the quality and quantity of education can also be expected to reduce fertility. In general there is a strong negative relationship between how much education a woman receives and the number of children she bears during her lifetime (World Bank 1988: 7).

The second paradigm, which was more apparent within the Non-Formal Education Division's own documentation, was the 'Freirian' model of literacy which invokes a more bottom-up, critical and holistic view of the world and sees the acquisition of literacy skills as part of a process to 'empower' individuals.

The Non-Formal Education Division initially advocated what it called a 'Modified Freirian Approach' based on the work pioneered by the Institute of Adult Education, Ghana. This approach took a more holistic view and saw a literacy campaign as emerging from a more participatory needs' assessment, which would involve learners in identifying their own problems and 'empowering' them through social action.

However, the impracticalities of developing such a bottom-up approach on a national scale soon became apparent during the pilot phase, when the pressure to scale-up and maximise the number of learners took precedence over developing participative approaches. Therefore, rather than eliciting the functional learning themes from the primary stakeholders, the first literacy primers focused on a limited number of priority themes, largely occupational, identified by resource persons in the capital, Accra.

Had a more participatory approach to identifying functional themes taken place it might have generated very different priority areas. In earlier project documentation there was little systematic analysis of gender concerns. Many references were made to the 'communities' needs' (which were largely seen as synonymous with male needs), and the occupational practices prioritised for both the initial literacy primers and the post-literacy stage, (farming, fishing, blacksmiths and woodcarvers) showed a strong bias to male-dominated occupations.

However, as the pilot phase progressed, and partly as a result of donor pressure, the consideration of women's learning needs did receive growing attention. In the NFED Project Identification Proposal to the World Bank in 1991 it was recognised that illiteracy was more prevalent among women than men and highlighted the multiple roles of women as mothers, medium-scale industrialists, farmers and retail traders. In so doing it moves beyond the somewhat 'welfarist' view of women's role, focusing on their reproductive roles, reflected in earlier documentation.

Moreover, throughout the pilot phase the government/donor discourse increasingly shifted beyond the narrow and technocratic tendency identified by Kabeer as typical of many education programmes for women (Kabeer 1992). Perhaps influenced by the Freirian conscientisation paradigm, education for women was increasingly seen as having more value than merely reducing family size and enhancing productivity. Instead the donor/NFED discourse increasingly alluded to women's 'empowerment' and the importance of literacy in enhancing women's status throughout the pilot phase. However, the processes through which such 'empowerment' was to occur were somewhat opaque. Such attempts to demonstrate the importance of literacy for women beyond a 'welfarist' approach, were laudable and the increasing emphasis on women helped shift the focus onto getting greater participation of women in classes (approximately 63 per cent of registered learners in FLP were women in the pilot phase).

However, this discourse with its growing emphasis on transforming and empowering non-literate women, can also be seen as creating a false dichotomy between non-literate and literate women, which may exaggerate the vulnerability and powerlessness of the former. Within the agency discourse, there is what I term (adapting Mohanty 1988: 88) the 'composite illiterate woman' who is seen to be powerless, voiceless and sometimes positively lethal due to her lack of literacy skills. One vivid example of such stereotyping was enacted in a literacy play performed by a local group in order to 'motivate' women to attend literacy classes. In this play the example was given of a non-literate woman who inadvertently poisoned a family member through not being able to read a prescription!

These pejorative representations of non-literate women may also act to diminish the existing knowledge of non-literate women and the value of their non-schooled literacy skills, whilst reifying schooled literacies. For instance, in an earlier attempt to devise a syllabus for the Integrated Community Centres for Employable Skills (ICCES), the keeping of accounts was identified as a useful vocational skill but the indigenous (unschooled) accounting skills were dismissed as inferior.

Many illiterate women who are gainfully employed can hardly tell the real profit margin they get. They are satisfied for as long as the volume of money around their loins continues to broaden. It is only when the amount begins to dwindle that they pause to reckon from memory. A crude way of reckoning is by tallying on walls using pebbles and other funny methods of keeping accounts. Functional Literacy which includes simple reckoning is a very important asset.  
(NFED/ICCES, 1991)

The portrayal of the composite illiterate woman is also detrimental, in that it represents women as a homogenous group which share the same position and vulnerability within the social hierarchy. The Functional Literacy Programme within the context of PAMSCAD assumed that, through targeting non-literate women through the FLP, significant progress would be made in alleviating the poverty of the poorest and most vulnerable. In looking at the local realities of the FLP, however, I will show that during the pilot phase in Gomoa district the FLP failed to reach the poorest, and most of the non-literate women reached were generally those who could afford to invest considerable time, and afford the opportunity costs of attending classes.

Both the human capital and Freirian literacy paradigms which underpinned the agency discourse on literacy, gender and poverty, although emerging from markedly different ideological traditions, had a striking feature in common; both approaches make significant claims for literacy's potential to transform society and enhance women's position within society. Lower fertility, increased productivity, greater political awareness and empowerment were all seen to be the likely spin offs from the functional literacy campaign.

There has been increasing unease with such models of literacy, postulating a great divide between non-literate and literate individuals and societies in which literacy is seen to be politically liberating and allowing individuals to have independent access to knowledge. The ideological model of literacy postulated by Street (1984) challenges the notion that literacy is a unitary phenomenon which can automatically bring about progress and rational thought (what he identifies as the 'autonomous' approach to literacy). Instead theorists such as Street, Levine, (1986) Lankshear and Lawler (1987) argue that it is more appropriate to think of a spectrum of different literacies which are embedded within their specific social context and relations of power.

Through adopting such an ideological approach to literacy, I would argue it is possible to focus on the different meanings and values surrounding literacy and the range of literacy practices prioritised by women within the Functional Literacy campaign. The following section shows how an 'ideological' approach to literacy can reveal how different communicative practices are interwoven with power relations including gender and class relations. The implications of this are that an individual's attempts to access schooled literacy skills and utilise them to enhance their social and economic standing are mediated by that individuals' varied class and gendered locations.

## 4 Local Realities

During my year's field-work in Ghana, I spent the majority of my time in Apam, a coastal town in Central Region; the district capital of the southern pilot area of the Functional Literacy Programme. Taking both Apam and a second smaller town, Gomoa Tarkwa, in the hinterland of Gomoa district, I was able to contrast the donor discourses regarding women, literacy and their perceived vulnerabilities, with the local perceptions of literacy and vulnerability. Through taking an ethnographic approach I was able to examine literacies within the wider context of power relations. This approach entailed lengthy participant observation in a number of diverse situations and locations – from the church to the market place – and included focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to find women's own perceptions regarding the meanings and values around literacy.

This methodology contrasts with many studies of education cited in the development literature, which takes it as an isolated variable linking it with other dimensions of development such as reductions in fertility (e.g. Cochrane 1979) and enhanced productivity (Lockheed, Jamison and Lau 1980). Such approaches, I would argue, are unable to reveal the local meanings and values literacies and education have for the individual, and by reducing literacy to a unitary competence, disguise the local variations in the impact which literacy in different contexts.

In the donor literacy discourse, the claims for the transformatory potential of literacy often rested on the belief that literacy skills would make the learner more productive and efficient, thus helping to reduce the neo-literates' vulnerability. Implicit in these statements is the belief in the inefficiency of non-schooled individuals. The statements made about the 'funny' methods illiterate women use for keeping accounts in NFED documentation (see above) also denigrate their indigenous skills.

Observations in the bustling fishing communities of Apam, however, provide a more complex picture as to how specific literacy and numeracy skills are used and perceived, and throw light on the extent to which schooled literacy skills can reduce vulnerability of women within this social context. Here was an opportunity to see how literacies and numeracies are embedded in wider gender relations.

Traditionally within fishing communities such as Apam there is a clear division of labour between fisherman and fishmonger; usually between husband and wife, although women could find another long-term trading partner if her husband did not go to sea. The main advantage of such stable trading partnerships was the ability of women to purchase fish on credit. The literacy and numeracy skills required to calculate how much money was credited were clearly key competencies required by women to ensure that they were not cheated and also to maintain their credibility as sound traders.

On a weekly to three-weekly basis, female fishmongers were required to account for the number of crates of fish they had been credited, which was complicated by the fact that the price of fish would

vary from day to day. Secondly they had to account for the amount they had spent on expenses for the boat crew (fuel, food, cigarettes) and subtract this from the amount owing to trading partners. Thirdly they had to add on their own profit margins.

The majority of women making these calculations had little or no formal education yet they had devised methods for recording transactions and performing arithmetic calculations. In some fishmongers' houses it was possible to see chalked up on the walls tallies indicating the numbers of crates of fish received at the different prices, and quantities of fish 'sub-contracted' to other women to smoke. In addition, fishmongers performed arithmetic calculations to work out the monies owed. In one system palm nut kernels, pebbles and maize represented different units of currency and I witnessed women fishmongers performing multiplication to calculate the value of crates of fish credited at different prices. In many cases they were able to do this more quickly using these counters than I was able to work out with pencil and paper.

Therefore, despite being unschooled, they failed to match the stereotype of the 'composite illiterate woman' as they were clearly in possession of a number of literacy and numeracy skills which they had learnt from family members and other traders on an informal basis. Non-schooled women in this context were clearly not the vulnerable empty vessels into which functional literacy and numeracy skills could be poured. The literacy skills, by their own admission, were not perfect or foolproof but were arguably more functional than the more abstract arithmetic skills being taught in the classrooms of the FLP.

More formalised accounts were also used during the transactions between fishmongers and fishermen. Each fishing boat was part of a fishing 'company' which included the fishermen themselves, the boat owner, the outboard motor owner and the boat secretary. It was the secretary who kept accounts for the men of the number of crates of fish given to the different fishmongers and at what prices. Although in the donor discourse such 'schooled' accounting practices might be seen as superior and a more transparent way of recording transactions, the reality was that such accounts were still subject to being

manipulated and often seen to be highly suspect. Fishmongers claimed that the male boat secretaries would often try to dupe the women by telling them that the fish had been given to them at higher prices than originally agreed. Many women, therefore, had little confidence in the use of schooled literacy, especially when used to support such false claims, and had more faith in the oral, collective and contextual recording of transactions at the times that goods were exchanged than the numbers being put down in the secretary's book. It was easier for fishermen to persuade one book keeper to change the figures than for fishmongers to persuade a group of ones peers to perjure themselves.

Such reservations about the benefits of schooled literacy have parallels with what Clancy (1979) describes in examining the shift from orality to literacy in Britain after the Norman conquest. He shows that the introduction of documents did not immediately inspire trust.

There was no straight simple line of progress from memory to written record. People had to be persuaded – and it was difficult to do so – that documentary proof was a sufficient improvement on existing methods to merit the extra expense and mastery of novel techniques which it demanded.  
(Clanchy 1979: 231)

Each Tuesday, female fishmongers and male fishermen would have heated discussions about monies owed. Although some fishmongers felt that the formal literacy skills used by the fishermen allowed them to dupe the 'uneducated women', it appeared that it was not merely the schooled literacy which validated the men's accounts but also their enhanced power within asymmetrical gender relations. The authority bestowed on the accountant and secretary was only partly due to their formal schooling. Their social esteem was also enhanced by the backing they received from their male peers and colleagues and fellow members of the fishing company.

It was evident, therefore, that within trading practices between men and women in Apam different literacy skills cannot be seen as neutral and automatically empowering. They are interconnected with the wider power, negotiating skills and gender

dynamics. It is arguable that had fishmongers perfected 'schooled' accounting skills they could still have been duped by the male boat secretary 'cooking the books', and ultimately the 'truth' of the matter would have to be orally contested between male fishermen and female fishmongers. Again, this contrasts markedly with agency representations of literacy where the 'literate' is perceived as being capable of more rational thought, and through more critical enquiry are less likely to be duped by the unscrupulous middleman, political demagogue or proselytising preacher.

## 5 Symbolic Value of Literacy

Through interviews with literacy learners it was possible to examine the multiple meanings and values which women attributed to the literacy process. In addition to more instrumental requirements than learning to read and write – such as perfecting accounting skills to improve trading practices and writing letters – for many women literacy appeared to have an important symbolic dimension. Gaining schooled literacy skills was not merely about gaining technical skills to become more productive and efficient in one's work, but it was one way of acquiring status in the Weberian sense of gaining 'social honour'. Many women desired specific literacy skills to enable them to read from the Bible in church, a practice largely dominated by senior and generally male members of the congregation. One elderly learner stated, 'I wish one day I will read and write and I will look into the singing book (hymn book) and sing a beautiful song to shock them, and by this I know they will hurriedly come and sign their names' (i.e. register in the literacy classes).

When asked how women had benefited from attending the classes one facilitator claimed that whereas before church literacy classes were dominated by men, now women could sing hymns and read passages from the Bible.

Although such successes might be overlooked when literacy classes are evaluated, for many women such incremental change marked a shift in their social status. To be able to stand up and read in church was a public statement marking their graduation to the ranks of the 'educated', and with this all the associated status markers that came with literacy.

In the minds of many schooled and non-schooled, attending formal education was often defined in very moral terms and associated with being a good woman who fulfils her domestic role. Many learners believed that education made one more 'respectful', 'polite', 'clean' and 'dutiful'. One of the eldest women in Apam, a woman in her 70s, reflected on why she wanted to attend the literacy classes:

Education is very important for human life, it broadens your mind – it keeps you clean – you can identify what is good and what is bad. Also household keeping, it also gives you knowledge of how to keep your house. Even as you just saw now, I was wiping your chairs for you when you came in. If you are not educated you won't know small things like that.

Such remarks contrast markedly with the more radical discourse of women's empowerment and Freirian conscientisation underpinning some of the donor discourses. However, these remarks are hardly surprising given the way in which the donor WID (Women in Development) agenda was interpreted at the field level.

Within the two towns where I undertook fieldwork, all but one of the facilitators of literacy classes were male, despite efforts to attract women to fill these positions. Although the need to register as many women as possible was recognised and encouraged by the facilitators, the content of the classes was underpinned by a dominant welfarist notion of women's role in the development process. Interviews with facilitators revealed that the majority saw the importance of educating women in terms of their reproductive roles, especially to be good dutiful wives. As one facilitator explained,

we usually teach them how they should care for their children and especially their husbands, and mostly how this will help country-wide. And even then the house where they are living. When there is peace in every house everything will be very very good. So we teach them how to be patient and how they will go about their work so peace will be brought into this country.

Despite this 'welfarist' notion of women in development being widely espoused, it would be inaccurate to give the impression that women were

automatically absorbing this ideology, and for some learners attending literacy classes was perceived as a way of contesting inequitable power relations within the household. As one 39 year old trader explained her reason for attending classes, 'Because my husband is an educated man and I did not go to school he considers me inferior in everything. If something happens and I want to give some advice he doesn't take it because I did not go to school'. Attending literacy classes, she claimed, had enabled her to appear educated in the eyes of her husband and given her opportunities to show off her superior Fanti language skills.

What is notable about the examples cited above is that, firstly, literacy had meanings and values for women in ways which were not reflected in the donor discourses; for instance, the importance of religious literacy for enhancing social status. Secondly, in many cases the changes observed and perceived by learners during the pilot phase of the project were largely incremental shifts in acquiring specific literacy skills and enhancing status within a particular context. This contrasts markedly with the more hyperbolic claims for literacy, empowerment and social mobilisation which characterise the agency discourse.

Also the interpretation of 'women in development' by field level staff which gave the programme a strong 'welfarist' tone also contradicts the notion that literacy for women is automatically liberating and empowering, and, if interpreted within patriarchal norms, the literacy process could be seen as reinforcing notions of women's subjugation and vulnerability.

Admittedly my research took place at a time when the programme was relatively new, and it would be reasonable to expect dramatic impacts at such an early stage in the programme. However, from observing the existing literacy practices and perceptions of women, it was hard to conceptualise the dramatic transformations described in the agency discourse.

## **6 Vulnerability and Access to Literacy Classes**

The conflation of illiteracy and vulnerability within the donor discourse helped to create a homogenous

category of non-literate women which disguised the multiple class locations of non-literate women. During the pilot phase of the campaign the clear assumption was that the project was poverty focused in that the majority of learners were illiterate women. However, from observations within the pilot districts it was evident that the extent of vulnerability of non-literate women varied enormously. The way the literacy campaign was implemented in the southern pilot area, I will argue, failed to address the constraints faced by some of the most vulnerable women, and thus led to high drop-out rates.

As in many other mass campaigns, whether for literacy or family planning, a considerable amount of resources was committed to 'motivating' individuals to attend the literacy classes. However, I would agree with Stromquist when she states that motivational factors in relation to attendance can be misleading as 'Motivation is an explanation implying a great deal of autonomy for the individual' (Stromquist 1990).

The language of motivation fails to address the power relations within which women are located and the diversity of resources controlled by women, which may allow or deny them time to take up non-formal educational activities.

In the planning of the Functional Literacy Programme certain assumptions were made by the implementing agencies regarding the 'elasticity' of women's time. In order to get the maximum number of non-literates with functional literacy skills in the shortest period of time, unrealistic expectations were made about the number of hours women would be prepared to spend in the classroom, as indicated by the following quotation:

If class meetings can be held four days a week then BL [basic literacy] will take ten months from that time, if class meetings are held five days a week then BL would take eight months. To cut down costs NFED would naturally prefer meetings five days a week and district literacy committees are urged to persuade their learners to accept this schedule.

(NFED 1991: 16)

Such top-down scheduling was, not surprisingly,

contested during the pilot phase. Attending the classes in the evenings brought with it various opportunity costs, which were clearly more difficult to bear amongst poorer women. In the majority of cases women relied heavily on their own wage labour, and remittances from their husbands tended to be unpredictable and formed a small part of their total income; therefore they were reluctant to attend classes if it meant foregone income. As one irregular attender of the literacy classes in Apam explained, 'I am a trader and sometimes people buy a lot in the evenings, and if it happens like that I don't get the chance to attend classes'. This view was reiterated by a woman at the Catholic literacy class in Apam who commented that during the time they were in classes they could sell between 100–150 *cedis* worth of goods.

The psychological strains of poverty also deterred women from attending. An elderly trader who had incurred large funeral expenses after her husband's death explained that financial worries had 'frustrated her' and she felt so preoccupied that she could not attend. This view was repeated by another woman interviewed who stated:

Sometimes it is nothing but poverty that makes me absent myself from class, however I usually manage to attend. Sometimes I find it difficult to make ends meet and when such things happen I find it difficult to follow the teacher at the literacy class.

The differing economic positions of women were also linked to their ability to gain access to, and control, productive resources, which had important implications for their sustained participation within the programme. More affluent women were able to reduce their workload by contracting labour. For instance, some of the fishmongers attending classes paid other women to smoke their fish which meant that they themselves did not have to stay up all night. Also attending the literacy class was a relatively wealthy cement trader who employed a number of individuals (including an accountant to look after her books). As well as freeing-up this woman to attend classes this was one illustration of how non-literate women's vulnerability was reduced by being able to link into literacy networks and use the skills of others to perform specific literacy/numeracy tasks.



In the agricultural sector the ability to procure land and labour affected women's room to manoeuvre and participate in government programmes such as the FLP. It is clear that in order to understand the asymmetries in access to productive resources it is necessary to look at the wider gender relations. In Gomoa Tarkwa I learned that women could get access to their land through their husbands and on a share-cropping basis. A woman's ability to control her own share-cropping land would depend upon the time expected to work on the shared farm and on the amount of labour she could command. From focus group discussions it was evident that women did not always get their fair share of the produce from the joint farm. One woman complained that she used to farm on a piece of land belonging to her husband but every year her produce was 'stolen'. Therefore she decided to acquire land in her own right on a share-cropping basis. The ability to gain access to land and control the fruits of their labour had implications for women's income and the hours they would have to work each day. Exhortations for women to attend literacy classes where they had to work on joint farms as well as their own land, not surprisingly often fell on deaf ears.

Interestingly, although the revised literacy primers prepared during the pilot phase paid greater attention to agricultural themes, the section on modern forms of farming looked at largely non-controversial issues such as the use of fertiliser and spacing of crops. The lesson did not seek to challenge issues such as land inheritance and inequitable divisions of labour and resources, and thus did not seek to challenge wider power relations which inhibited the sustained attendance of female learners.

The failure to address the opportunity costs of women's time and to see their motivation to attend classes within the dynamic of gender and class relations, I would argue, contributed significantly to high drop-out rates and irregular attendance of women during the pilot phase. Of the classes observed, approximately one third were attending classes on a regular basis, one third were irregular in their attendance and one third dropped out altogether.

75-80 per cent of the learners initially enrolled in Apam and Gomoa Tarkwa were women, which reflects the disparities in women's access to formal

education (especially amongst older women) and also the initial targeting of female learners through church fellowship groups. However, although women considerably outnumbered men, the drop-out rates were much higher amongst women. In two of the literacy classes for which I was able to get accurate registers, one out of six men registered in the Catholic literacy class had dropped out compared to half of the women in the same class. Data from the Methodist literacy class also confirmed that men were attending more regularly than women. Moreover, of the women who did attend regularly, the majority were over the age of 45, which had implications for the relevance of the 'functional' themes on family planning, teenage pregnancy and childhood immunisation which were promoted in the primers as functional themes for women.

## 7 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is not to downplay the relevance of literacy for women but to stress the importance of locating literacies within the context of wider asymmetrical power relations, including gender and class relations. The notion of the 'composite illiterate woman' which tends to conflate female illiteracy with vulnerability, I have argued, disguises the varying degrees of power and control of resources amongst unschooled women. In addition, these pejorative representations of illiterate women tend to dismiss as unimportant the knowledge and skills, including literacy skills, of unschooled women.

Attempts to measure poverty and vulnerability within development agencies have increasingly shifted away from crude measures such as GDP per capita to looking at other indicators of well-being. These are reflected in indexes such as the UNDP's **Human Development Index** in which female literacy rates have been taken as a key variable which many organisations use as a proxy of deprivation. Although widening definitions of poverty and vulnerability should be welcomed, there is often a tendency to go beyond seeing female illiteracy as a mere 'proxy' indicator of vulnerability and in some cases there appears to have been a conflation of female illiteracy with vulnerability and poverty in the development discourse. The implication of this is a false dichotomy generated between non-literate and literate women and can place undue emphasis

on the acquisition of literacy skills without examining their relevance in the context of access to other skills and productive resources.

Participative planning processes using more qualitative, ethnographic methodologies, which attempt

to excavate unschooled women's existing literacies and the meanings and values women place on specific literacy skills, arguably can help challenge such assumptions, thus making non-formal education programmes more relevant to women's wider needs.

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